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ABSTRACT

The principal failure of attempts to reduce illiteracy in the United States lies in the conceptualization of the problem to which literacy is the solution and in an underfinanced practice that parallels dominant educational institutions, emphasizing the service of individuals. Adult education plays a critical role in liberatory action. Although the intervention of adult educators often preempts social goals by fostering individual advancement, systematic reflection--the core of adult education--is critical in shaping the direction of social change. One way to define literacy is to identify the problems for which it is the solution. The U.S. Literacy Initiative proposes literacy as a remedy for the exclusion of a large segment of the population from effective citizenship and productive jobs. The problem is one of functionality and is premised on an inventory of those functions appropriate to maintenance of the social order. However, illiteracy is not the cause, but rather a by-product of social disfunctions that are, in origin, related to class, gender, and race. The most critical problem to which illiteracy is related is economic and political inequality. Developing the context for literacy is not an educational task, but the principal political task of any society committed to equal participation and democracy. Literacy must be understood in a broader context of class, gender, and race and linked with productive social movements that redress social inequities. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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Learning to be Heard:
Organization, Power and Literacy

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> The switch from the vernacular to an officially taught mother tongue is perhaps the most significant—and therefore the least researched—event in the coming of a commodity-intensive society. The radical change from the vernacular to taught language foreshadows the switch from breast to bottle, from subsistence to welfare, from production for use to production for market, from expectations divided between state and church to a world where the Church is marginal, religion is privatized, and the state assumes the maternal functions heretofore claimed only by the Church. Formerly, there had been no salvation outside the Church; now, there would be no reading, no writing—if possible no speaking—outside the educational sphere.
>
> Ivan Illich (1981)

Illiteracy is not an educational problem. It is a political problem leaving millions in the United States without voice in decisions which affect day-to-day life. Our educational solutions frequently exacerbate the political problem by ignoring the systemic roots of this voicelessness—a disenfranchisement grounded in class, gender and race. On the other hand, the major literacy campaigns of this century have demonstrated that learning to read and write is inexorably linked to movements for democratic social change which bring into being a political apparatus within which newly literate voices can both speak and be heard.

The Failure of the U.S. Literacy Initiative

In difficult times, contradictions rise to the surface of consciousness. Ideas—revolutionary and dangerous—are born, soon provoking in counterpoint new contrivances of State which maintain an illusion of balance in the existing social order. Upswings of economic indicators disguise unofficial embarrassment in the face of unrelenting poverty, a wart on the nose of affluence. Record profits belie corporate failure to provide work and sustenance for all, and ground gained by organized workers after years of struggle must be gained again. Contracts, promises, backs are broken and the victims condemned to judgments of personal failure, or hidden in romantic and depoliticized images, like Juan Valdez picking coffee beans high in the Andes. The poor are theologized as inevitable in a fallen world.

Escalating consumption has merely served to heighten contrast with the abject failure of our economic system to provide for all citizens. In the midst of efforts to regain balance, a national initiative on behalf of literacy was

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announced—a hand-is-quicker-than-the-eye, non-program which diverted previously existing appropriations to a highly publicized public/private partnership which could scarcely hope to remedy the reported failures of public schooling. Producing more hype than substance, five years of the U.S. Literacy Initiative have failed to significantly reduce the ignominy of massive illiteracy in the world's most developed nation. Had we waged a war against illiteracy (as our nation did against drugs) we would have lost that war also. As it is, our "initiative"—an 'underwhelming' term, to be sure—has had little impact on those for whom the initiative was almost taken.

The effort was doomed from the start for at least three reasons. First, the analysis upon which it was based was flawed. A sluggish economy and flagging Gross National Product was peevishly blamed on failing schools which had abandoned the traditional "3-R's" and an under-skilled labor force in need of remedial training. This analysis attributed to workers and the unemployed responsibility for everything from an intolerable federal deficit to the move of industry to nations where less educated, less skilled labor could be obtained at a fraction of U.S. labor costs. At least in part, the political purpose of the U.S. Literacy Initiative has been diversionary, drawing attention from imbedded contradictions in the national economy, emphasizing individual skill development as a solution to domestic problems of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment. U.S. policy, grounded on a moribund Human Capital Theory, proclaimed literacy work to be an investment in the economic future, but its been a "bear" market with questionable returns for the few private-sector investors who rose to the challenge.

A second reason for the failure of the Literacy Initiative is methodological. Our literacy programs have been adapted to an American technology in which malfunctions are remedied by the administration of professional care. Dominant strategies for promoting literacy emphasize reading and writing as individual goals to be supported by individualized instruction and, frequently, by one-on-one tutoring. Individuals are asked to overcome the limitations of social class, welfare dependency, or joblessness by personal effort and achievement. They are asked to believe that the reason they have access to a disproportionately small share of the nation's resources is that they failed to complete their schooling. A negative self-image is touted as the incentive for pursuing literacy, while ignoring the limits of class, keeping the unschooled at a perpetual disadvantage, and ultimately making them collaborators in their own stupefaction.

A third, and for many the most obvious, reason for the failure of our literacy effort is that the resources—both human and financial—required to reverse the imposed silence of poverty and "welfare-ism" have been grossly underestimated. Every provider of literacy services will attest that combined public and private funds are insufficient to reach more than a small fraction of those who are in need of literacy services. The resulting programs, ranging in their manifestation from progressive, community-based efforts to school-based extensions of primary school, represent a token national commitment, at best.

In sum, the principal failure of our attempts to reduce illiteracy in the United States lies in our conceptualization of the problem to which literacy is the solution and in an under-financed practice which parallels dominant educational institutions, emphasizing the service of individuals.

Literacy as Social Welfare

A burgeoning bureaucracy of service providers has gradually replaced producers of goods as the principal occupation in the United States. Since the 1950's, massive doses of adult education (together with mental health, welfare counseling, and social work) have been administered by well-intentioned professionals who would reduce through social service the widening gap between "haves" and "have-nots," between literate and illiterate—a chasm into which more rhetoric than critical analysis or creative effort has been poured. The victims of poverty are besieged by advocates and helpers whose command of specialized knowledge enables them alone to know which remedies are in the best interests of the poor. Adult educators adjust minds, bringing perceptions into conformity with society's advertising copy. Educators try to correct social malfunctions (poverty, unemployment, teen pregnancy, neighborhood violence) by distributing proper and socially useful knowledge and skills to individuals. The few clients of adult education who successfully learn to read and write can only hope to escape these social malfunctions while leaving friends and family behind to cope as best they can. By creating a way out for exceptional learners, adult educators reinforce the systemic conditions which reproduce illiteracy from generation to generation and perpetuate the need for educational services. As with the fabled angel who attempted to pour the ocean into a hole in the sand one sea-shell at a time, educators hope to remedy massive social inequities by servicing individuals.

State-sponsored literacy is a minor element within the larger social service apparatus—part of a welfare system which serves as safety valve against riot, mayhem and other violent eruptions threatening the social fabric in times of discontent. Mounting anger at the unavailability of jobs, shelter, or food among 'disadvantaged' populations heightens the volatility of racially and economically segregated sectors. The preemptive charity of welfare undercuts reformist aspirations within these sectors through two related outcomes: welfare either dulls the edge of poverty with dependency-building, temporary benefits (as with public aid) or shifts attention from conditions which necessitate such benefits to the recipients of those benefits—to the poor themselves who, through education or training, must prove their worthiness to receive.

First, the welfare system has under-compensated individuals for an increasingly disproportionate distribution of wealth under a free market economy, freeing the more affluent from the necessity of rethinking their economic philosophy. The amount of compensation varies greatly, depending upon the extent of social unrest, public consciousness of social contradictions, and the availability of resources in a debt-ridden economy. At the same time, programs which address the systemic roots of poverty—those which

redress the unequal distribution of political and economic power through organized community action—are generally spurned. Except for a brief period in the mad-cap sixties when social action actually received government funding, the emphasis has always been placed upon helping individuals, unleashing an army of case workers and providers—unwitting mercenaries all—who manage the lives of the indigent.

In less affluent times, welfare largesse gives way to blaming the victims who are assumed to lack the necessary skills, competence or will necessary for self-support. For welfare providers, poor and untrained 'illiterates' represent a major segment of the population left out of a self-contained economy, a group whose major need is not doles (as in more prosperous times), but roles in a capitalist system. Implicit in this analysis is the assumption that the system can sustain full employment, provide housing and health care for all. As a result, most programs for poor people assume that their problem is adaptation to the system, and not the system itself. In self-serving and victim-blaming solutions, such programs assume that poverty is the result of deficient schooling—both a failure of the schools to teach and ultimately a failure of those not fitting our definition of 'literate' to achieve. Social welfare becomes remediation—imparting privileged wisdom to impoverished clients who are expected to become self-sufficient, independent, and productive members of the work force.

In fact, the literacy programs promoted by our government are more likely to reinforce dependency, internalize failure, and ultimately leave unaffected the distribution of wealth and resources. Graduates of training programs remain unemployed when their problem is the absence of jobs; graduates of literacy classes still have no voice in decisions affecting their lives when their problem from the beginning is political and economic powerlessness. Ivan Illich provides a term for this phenomenon. "Iatrogenic disease" is illness directly attributable to the ministrations of a physician. (Illich 1976) By extension, this term can apply to interventions by adult educators who imagine themselves as suppliers of remedies to the educationally deficient. Their ministrations, far from eliminating poverty and its causes, are instruments of iatrogenic disorders that leave the poor not only oppressed, but more importantly, unable to recognize the systemic causes of their own oppression.

At best, the Literacy Initiative has empowered a few to lift themselves by their boot straps out of a cycle of failed generations. At worst, it has been a tool of domestication, mainstreaming potential leaders of the opposition into personally rewarding, but socially unproductive roles. Literacy, as a governmental program, has frequently been a euphemism for homogenization and social control. State Legalized Impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG), which mandates a regulated curriculum under the supervision of credentialed teachers, is a case in point. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 requires assimilation of 'illegal aliens' into the dominant culture through compulsory learning. In fact, as David Castellanos pointed out, the problem as experienced by a growing number of Latino and other oppressed

minorities in the United States is not assimilation, but decolonization—learning to unlearn negative self-images while casting off the ill-suited trammels of an alien culture. (Castellanos 1985)

The intervention of literacy specialists and other professional problem-solvers, whose analysis has erroneously led them to conclude that the problem is skill-deficient individuals, exacerbates the oppression. The agenda of the "haves" is to keep, to define the poor as the problem, and to send as emissaries of good will an army of educators and other professionals who can assist the poor with 'their' problem. But as Alinsky pointed out, the agenda of the "have-nots" is to get—an agenda in diametric opposition to the professionalized service providers who already have. (Alinsky 1971) As long as the counter-agenda of the "have-nots" can be prevented from surfacing—an agenda which might well begin with reclaiming control over education and other services—, the rights of privileged educators can be protected.

A resolution of this undeclared conflict of agendas can be found in deprofessionalized literacy work which addresses the broader social goals of the "have-nots." Those who would assist the poor must first reverse roles, unlearn technical solutions, renounce alliances with dominant and discriminatory institutions, and be assisted by the poor themselves. Those who would be teachers must first be learners. Solutions to systemic problems can only emerge when those who have been defined as problems can begin to redefine the problem in terms of their own social agenda.

Such a perspective is not based on a romanticized image of the poor—that the poor, left to themselves, will create a democratic society. Oppressed people are as likely to reproduce the systems which oppressed them, merely exchanging roles with their oppressors. Nor will removing external constraints eliminate the oppressor within which can continue to thwart creative and democratic action. Nonetheless, those constraints, both internal and external, cannot be overcome without the full participation of the oppressed themselves, who ultimately must be instruments of their own liberation.

Adult education plays a critical role in liberatory action. While the intervention of adult educators often preempts social goals by fostering individual advancement, nonetheless systematic reflection—the core of adult education—is critical in shaping the direction of social change, determining whether its outcome be a democratic society or a new society which replicates the oppression of the old. Appropriate words for the newly literate can not be drawn from neutral texts or orthodox lexicons; they must be generated anew by those who previously could not read, who have first learned to critically 'read' the causes of their powerlessness and reflect on their struggle to gain control over their lives. In a non-technological mode, deprofessionalized adult educators encourage unschooled, non-therapeutic, and non-bureaucratic forms of learning, while they themselves learn, with the poor, to be critical of educational and other servicing institutions.

Resistance

The most vocal and effective leaders among the poor appear to be those who have successfully avoided "clientization" at the hands of teachers and other service providers. Increasingly, self-imposed segregation and exile has become the strategy of excluded minorities who recognize that they can only preserve their culture and be partners in dialogue with the dominant culture from a position of strength—that is, political and economic power. Educational agencies continue to report the same numbers of adults in need of literacy training as they did four years ago, leading to the disappointing conclusion that the overwhelming response of illiterates to the national Literacy Initiative has been massive and unequivocal resistance. Educators, refusing to reassess their depoliticized and individualized literacy programs, reassert that illiterates themselves are the problem and attribute poor motivation to the resisters. (Giroux 1983) Participation studies, many emphasizing psychological profiles of more docile and impressionable educational consumers, seek techniques for 'hot wiring' the ignition of the recalcitrant. Most studies fail to note, however, that the recalcitrant are highly motivated to resist, to just say "no" to ill-conceived and irrelevant solutions offered for what they clearly see, from the beginning, is a rigged contest.

Such studies also ignore the extent to which it is not literacy which is resisted, but rather definitions of literacy ascribed to and promoted by educators and their governmental sponsors. Street-educated youth can signify gang affiliations in codes most philologists would be unable to decipher and produce social analysis with astounding verbal rhythms in spontaneous rap. The self-defining economy of youth culture is grounded on communication rites which, however alien to dominant society, are both complex and sophisticated. Theirs is a vernacular uncolonized by literacy professionals. Similar examples could be drawn from members of ethnic and racial groups whose culture demands new definitions of "literacy."

One way to define "literacy" is to identify the problems for which it is the solution. As we have seen, the U.S. Literacy Initiative proposes literacy as a remedy for the exclusion of a large segment of the population from effective citizenship and productive jobs. Without basic reading skills, the citizenry is unable to be influenced by advertising, follow instructions in the work place, or heed warnings of the Surgeon General. In addition, an illiterate and alienated population is likely to become a burden to more affluent members of society, requiring tax-supported subsidies for day-to-day survival. The problem to which literacy is the solution, thus conceived, is one of functionality and is premised on an inventory of those functions which are appropriate to maintenance of the social order.

Literacy and Social Disfunctions

However, illiteracy is not the cause, but rather a by-product of social disfunctions which are, in origin, related to class, gender and race. It is not coincidence that most illiterate adults are poor and without influence. Less recognized, perhaps, is the fact that people are not poor and powerless because they cannot read and write. On the contrary, they cannot read and write

because they have been politically and economically excluded from those institutions of power within which the art of reading and writing is a valued and essential tool.

The most critical problem to which illiteracy is related is economic and political inequality. To understand the mechanisms by which illiteracy is a consequence of unequal relations of power, we must first recognize the uses of enforced silence—the muting of a voice for which writing is merely one vehicle. In colonized nations unequal power is frequently maintained by overt force—military presence, disappearances, political persecution, censorship, and the violent suppression of dissent. In such situations, where freedom of expression is denied, there is little inclination to become literate. Oppressed people, faced with situations they cannot change, adjust. They develop a rationale to explain those things which defy reason. They become fatalistic, blame the economy, blame the gods, blame themselves.

Oppression by force is inefficient, however. It is too visible, eventually politicizing every aspect of culture and galvanizing resistance. Force also destabilizes a nation's economy. It demands constant vigilance and a disproportionate share of national resources to maintain. More stable societies develop less obtrusive mechanisms for controlling dissent: bureaucracies, for example, which impose order under the guise of rationality and frustrate deviance with kinder, gentler, controls. As Gramsci observed, the advanced State, requiring neither overt force nor violence, maintains itself by hegemonic control through schools, media, and other instruments for the production and dissemination of culture. (Gramsci 1971) Literacy is, in such circumstances, a tool of hegemony.

It is a tool, however, which cuts both ways. Once having learned to read, a newly literate person is as capable of reading Che and Marx as instructions to Form 1040 of the Internal Revenue Service. Literacy not only produces compliant citizens, but also gives voice to dissent and informs action for social empowerment. When schools fail to maintain hegemony it is not because of poorly trained teachers or a misplaced neglect of basics, but because children and young adults are not easily fooled into believing that the basic skills of reading and writing will make a difference. In this they have frequently learned better than their teachers how to read the world, leaving behind those students who accumulate words, but do not thereby acquire a voice. (Freire 1970)

A few individuals, seeking to break free of poverty's grip, lengthen their stride to keep up with escalating demands for skill and knowledge. For others, the goal is not individual skill, but collective power—power to change oppressive conditions, control jobs, and shape the decisions that affect day-to-day life. In relation to such goals, education for literacy is critical, but not decisive. It is a means in service of social, political and economic change, which in the absence of social movement can achieve nothing.

Contextualizing Literacy

The outcomes of major revolutions in the southern hemisphere have been accompanied by widely-reported national mobilizations for literacy. From Nicaragua to Tanzania, remarkable successes in literacy have been achieved by linking reading and writing with concrete programs for economic and political change. In contrast, the American approach has consistently linked literacy with personal advancement—producing a few Horatio Algers—success stories proving that the system works, but at the expense of many others left behind. Which is to say, if the problem is political and economic inequality, then the solution is action for social change, not individual, boot-strap initiatives toward social mobility for a few. Action for social change is not mindless and hence learning to read and write, and above all to read critically and write creatively, is relevant to the task.

Strategies employed in more successful literacy campaigns elsewhere have assumed that poverty and class are consequences of economic and political arrangements over which the poor themselves hold little control—arrangements which can only begin to change when the poor achieve a collective literacy—that is, when the poor begin to speak with one voice. The poor and illiterate, without influence, wealth or institutional backing, have only the shared power of organization to support their struggle to gain control over their world. When literacy is conceived as a communicative tool for empowering groups, rather than individuals, and for mobilizing collective action, then astounding results occur. In Brazil, illiterate adults learned to read and write in thirty hours. (Brown 1978) In Nicaragua, illiteracy was reduced from 40% to 13% in two months. (Miller 1985)

Interestingly, the first major, successful literacy campaign in this century occurred in the rural South in the 1940's. Citizenship Schools began in the sea islands of South Carolina as a strategy of Blacks excluded from the right to vote by discriminatory voting laws which required that only those who successfully read and comprehended the state constitution could be enfranchised. Thousands of volunteers were mobilized in the first-ever, mass campaign for literacy throughout the South. In fact, the problem to which this campaign was addressed had not to do with reading and writing, but with political organization and power—with changing the face of the South and eventually the North as well.

The decisive factor in mobilizing a campaign for literacy is not pedagogical. It is not even educational; it is political. Literacy is not an end in itself. Its value is not self-contained, but rather derived from social relations which literacy makes possible. For southern Blacks, the value of literacy was the value of self-determination and the collective right to vote. For peasants in Nicaragua, the value of literacy was the value of participation in land reform and the organization of cooperatives. In each instance, the development of literacy skills was linked, indeed was identified, with organization for social change. By the same token, developing the context for literacy is not an educational task. It is the principal political task of any society committed to equal participation and democracy.

Most literacy efforts in the United States are de-contextualized, self-defined as neutral, without political agenda. Which is to say, the political agenda of literacy in the United States is usually to minimize disruptions to the social order by enlightening individuals willing to conform to the standards of a meritocracy. The deeper, more profound, political purpose of literacy—the advancement of social equality and participation in the decisions affecting day-to-day life—is ill-served by programs which merely foster the advancement of individuals in a serendipitous pursuit of jobs and independence.

The promotion of literacy is not a matter of technique or competence; it is not even a matter of adequate personnel or financial resources. The success or failure of literacy education rests on its relevance to the political context of those marginalized groups for whom such education is given—the contested space in which power of self-determination and interdependence are the outcomes. The process by which literacy is developed is a political act, literacy itself being neither a passive nor a neutral tool in the struggle for such outcomes.

These are not new lessons. As we have seen, such a theoretical framework has infused most successful literacy campaigns in the last century. So why do those whose training and social commitments make them likely proponents of a contextualized approach to literacy, continue to replicate the sterile and detached failures of the past and promote a literacy which merely perpetuates, in succeeding generations, the need for more and more literacy programs? The question, thus phrased, suggests—somewhat unfairly—its own answer: even professionals critical of their own professions hope to be gainfully employed in the future. Actually, the answer is likely to be more complex than this.

As educators, we are already inheritors of many of the advantages of our class—privileges denied to the illiterate whose learning we hope to direct. Our agenda—ours and the institutions which support us—is not only different, but in many ways opposed to the breakdown of privilege which a critical and deprofessionalized consciousness would require. We also are resisters, therefore, unable to understand and even less to accomplish what Paulo Freire calls "class suicide"—rejection of the privileges of class, gender and race and identification with the oppressed. (Freire 1978)

The first task of those who would promote literacy is to redefine the problem. Literacy must be understood in a broader context of class, gender and race and linked with productive social movements which redress social inequities. A national movement for civil rights, the organization of residents in public housing to take over management of their homes, the mobilization of parents for school reform, a "grass-roots" neighborhood group combating gentrification—each of these and hundreds more serve as contexts for the development of literacy. Members of a resident management corporation require a high level of literacy to negotiate contracts, interpret leases, and handle routine correspondence. Parents struggling to break out of a cycle of miseducation require reading skills to assist their own children.

Neighborhood groups require these same skills to build their organizations with newsletters and fliers.

Widespread participation in a literacy campaign can be built upon these and similar struggles for social change. In such instances, participants are not recruited into educational programs, but into political movements which dynamically interweave learning and action. Literacy begins with an agenda for change. Reading and writing are simply not important of themselves. It is the inter-subjective collaboration—the exchange of thoughts and ideas which anticipate and enable action—which reading and writing make possible that gives value and importance to literacy. Literacy as a political project assumes a clarity of purpose which obviates the need for the recruitment or retention of individual learners.

For the most part, the literacy game has been played by the wrong players and in the wrong court. Professional service providers, employed within specialized, self-defined neutral, educational institutions, are unlikely to represent the cutting edge of change. "Grass roots," community-based organizations, on the other hand, have been recognized for over a decade as effective instruments of both local change and progressive adult education. (Mezirow et al. 1975) It is not accidental that, in many areas of the country, these productive and relatively low-overhead organizations with their long history of success have had little access to public funds which instead continue to buttress traditional institutions with their equally long history of failure.

Strategies for success are widely known, if seldom employed. Literacy programs can—must, if they are to succeed—be built in relation to specific and realizable visions of social change. Such visions are embedded in struggles organized by local initiatives and in relation to concrete and immediate social goals. Literacy cannot stand alone as a neutral educational solution to complex and highly partisan social problems. It requires a political forum at hand—a plan of action—through which the newly literate can exercise the energy and creativity of their new-found voice. Such a forum exists only where the vernacular reigns and where the content of a critical literacy emerges from the context of planning and creating a participatory and democratic future—outside the educational sphere.

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